

STRAIGHT DOWN AT 610 KNOTS



by Lt. Zach Mosedale

Dark night, no moon, no goggles—I don't recommend that you try this at home.

But as a first-tour pilot fresh out of the FRS, I couldn't wear night-vision goggles because it was too dark, and I didn't have my mean-starlight qualification yet.

We had briefed a 2 v 2 AIC mission. Since our CAP point was 130 miles from the ship, and we only had an hour cycle, there wasn't much time to get started on the intercepts. As soon as we got on station, the bandits echoed, "Fight's on," and we turned in. I kept my eyes on the lead, lit the afterburners, and nosed the plane over. I watched the wing-sweep gauge work its way back (meaning the wings were sweeping normally) and saw the airspeed gauge approach mach 1.0.

I looked to the right at my lead and saw our aircraft was surrounded by a blue glow from the afterburners. As I moved the stick to the right, it wouldn't go past slightly left. We were going 630 knots into a night where you couldn't tell which way was up without your instruments.

The plane rolled off to the left, and I calmly said, "Cheese, I don't have control of the plane," while moving the throttles out of burner and to idle. The plane continued to roll left into a 90-degree angle of bank, so I continued the roll 270 degrees to the left to get back upright. The RIO said, "Understand you don't have control of the jet."

"I do not have control right now," I replied. The aircraft continued to roll left. I had full right rudder, but the stick wouldn't go right; it only would go forward, aft, and left. My RIO started to methodically call out airspeed and altitude, which meant one thing: If things didn't change quickly, we were ejecting. We rolled 360 degrees twice.

Thanks to the magic of time compression, I had plenty of time to think, "We are in the middle of the Red Sea, it is very dark, the helo will take forever to find us, and people can die in an ejection."

For some reason, I was inspired to manually jam the wings full forward. That freed the controls. I announced, "I've got it."

"Understand you have control of the plane."

"I jammed the wings full forward and got control."

We knocked it off and went home. I won't bore you with the gory details, but we were jazzed for the always-fun night carrier landing.

Reviewing the tape, we found the whole episode took only five seconds; it felt like at least a full minute. We lost 8,000 feet, bottomed out at 14,000 feet, and were going 610 knots almost straight down at recovery. As I thought about it in my stateroom that night, the cloud of invincibility that seems to shroud us exited stage left. What would you think of your chances of surviving an ejection at that speed?

FOD was binding the controls. A connector in the rear cockpit display had been improperly installed at the depot a few months earlier. When I threw the wings forward, we decelerated so quickly that the FOD must have come free. I never had taken FOD as seriously as some of my seniors and peers. Now I know better.



Lt. Mosedale flies with VF-102.

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